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WHEN I GO IN TO SELL MY EGGS TO HIM.

BESSIE GRAY

AND

OUR STEPMOTHER

BY

MARTHA PERRY LOWE

ILLUSTRATED



BOSTON
D. LOTHROP COMPANY
WASHINGTON STREET OPPOSITE BROMFIELD

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BESSIE GREY.

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BESSIE GREY





BESSIE GREY.

OUR little red house stands upon the hill ;
The path runs down between the elms and pines
Until it stops before my father's mill,
That sits upon the brook, o'erhung with vines,
And willows, which the clematis entwines,
And silver-leaf, that stoops beneath the stream
To dip its radiant forehead till it shines,
Reburnished, in the little waves that gleam.

My mother sleeps within the church-yard nigh ;
The sickly yarrow and the golden-rod
Are waving in the wan and pallid grass :
They stare on me ungently as I pass,
And, weary in their loneliness, they nod.
I will not see the yellow mounds, near by,
Where thin and sallow weeds their station keep,
To make a feeble mock at those who sleep ;
I plant blush-roses 'mong the poplar-trees,
And think upon the fields of heaven, not these.

My father works away, from morn till night :
 He is a kindly man, and cares for me ;
 Not oft he speaks ; his eye on me will light,
 And then I know he is not dull to see.
 He is more free of late ; this is the way
 He spoke to me, — I think 'twas yesterday :



UNTIL IT STOPS BEFORE MY FATHER'S MILL.

“ Hie, Bessie, get thee gone unto the town,
 And buy a gown of Ruel Morton’s son :
 He’ll like to sell it thee, and he’ll not frown
 To see thee wear it either, little one.”
 And Robin laughed and pulled me by the curls :
 He knew not why, for he is but a child.
 My brother’s eyes are blue as any girl’s :
 The summer suns have made him brown and wild.

I do not care about the foolish gown,
And yet I'm young and fair; I am not sad;
I love the sweet green earth, it makes me glad:
But, oh! I do not love old Ruel's son.
He is a gentle youth; his eye is bright,
When I go in to sell my eggs to him;
He looks so pleasant when I come in sight;
I think I will not go again at night:
The old man's eyes are growing very dim,
And Gilbert now is there at candle-light.

I know I am not vain: there's many a one
Who's better far than Bessie of the Mill;
But I do love my own sweet ways and will,
And foolish fancies howsoe'er they run;
I cut the apple at the August noon,
And hang it at the door in golden rings;
I heed not Robin when the corn he brings;
I'm listening to a little mellow tune,
Now gay, now sad, my spirit always sings.
I sit alone between the elms, and mend,
And knit my stockings while the brook runs by,
But faster run my sweet thoughts, lovingly,
One on the other, and they never end:
And yet I know not what my longing is,
I would not have it answered if I could:
To dream of nobleness is very good:
To dream of love and chivalry is bliss.

But Gilbert likes to sell his yarn and beer,
'Tis better far, he'd say, than dreaming here:
The shop is lighted with a flickering lamp:
'Tis better far than in the meadows damp,

To find the gentians looking at the skies,
 With their great fringed, wonderful, blue eyes,
 And see the gold moon up the hill-side rise.
 Yet he is mindful: when the buyers rough
 Stand round the counter with their country stuff,
 He answers them with friendly decent speech:



I CUT THE APPLE AT THE AUGUST NOON.

If I am in the store, his looks beseech
 That they will end their sordid talk; this ring
 Of "pay me what thou ow'st," — some petty thing,
 A half a cord of wood, perhaps, the debt;
 The bag of carrots will not cancel it.
 They're striding in and out for half a dime;

And comes a woman meekly, let her bide
Her time until they choose to step aside ;
And then go home and sweep her kitchen clean,
And blow the horn for them at dinner-time,
Nor speak unless her words do something mean.
Are they not men, can vote for whom they please,
And work whene'er they like, or take their ease
In this great country, where the farmer can
Be just as good as any other man ?

This suits not Gilbert : blushing oft, he deems
A woman better than himself, meseems.
'Tis not the girls alone so young as I
He treats with such a kind civility :
He serves Old Patty with her limping feet
Before the farmer's wife, so trig and neat ;
He holds poor Milly's pail of berries too,
Her arm is aching all the summer through, —
And if a handful from her measure flies, —
It may be unawares, — I mind he pays
A little more, lest he should wrong her eyes ;
For she is growing old and blind, he says.

I wish he would not love . . . not watch me so ;
There's Phœbe with her eyes so bright and black :
She's ever running to the door, I know.
The oil is out ; her father's pipe did crack ;
Or 'tis a knot of wool which she doth lack,
She "could not work another stitch without :" —
She holds it to the light ; she looks about ;
"How strange she cannot find the purple skein !"
She pulls the worsteds all apart again ;

She questions Gilbert, " which he thinks is best ;
Will he not tell her which is prettiest ? "

He speaks as pleasantly to her as me, —

To any one, I mean, within the shop.

Why should he not ? Is Phœbe plain to see ?

Does she not let her pretty eyelids drop ? —

Come, come, that's not the way he looks at thee,

Thee, Bessie, when thy errand makes thee stop.

What if he marries her some morning fine ?

Maybe she has a warmer heart than mine ;

It would not take him long, I venture say,

To find the warmest spot, — perchance to-day.

Well, there'll be no one to molest me then,

All day I'll sing my songs, and dream of men

Who're young and brave ; of such a magic tongue,

It holds you captive like a ballad sung ;

How some May-morning I shall go away,

And see the world, and read in gentle books,

And hear sweet music, and the daily talk

Of something all unknown to country folks,

And learn how soft-voiced women dainty walk,

With beauteous children copying their sweet looks,

And husbands hanging on their very speech,

And love's eye-worship passing each to each.

Is this the world ? Maybe 'tis not so fair,

And after all I'm only dreaming there.

The mill will stand as now it does at noon,

Robin will whistle low the self-same tune,

My plates be ready for the morrow's day,

The old clock strike in just the droning way.

Yet what of this ? my days will be my own,

And I shall wander round the mill alone.
What's that, a tear? Can't be I'm crying? Yes:
I did not use to be so strange as this.
Well, well, I'll cry it out; a good smart shower
Will brush away the cobwebs from this hour:
They tangle up my thoughts; I cannot see
The way I used to go, so light and free.
Was't only yesterday I went to town,
To buy that hateful gown?

Hark! who is that? "Tis Gilbert, as I live!
What business sends him up here from the town?
He'll see I have been crying: can I give
My hat a twist, and make it hide my face?
I'll braid away upon my palm-leaf crown.
Oh dear! Where is the strand? I've lost my place;
Perhaps he'll go up to the door and rap:
No, he will wake my father at his nap.
I'll meet him; no;—he sees I'm all alone;—
He turns this way;—how handsome he has grown!
What shall I say? I wish he'd mind the store,
Nor be abroad, when folks are at the door.

"Good-day, Sir Gilbert: you're at holiday,
You who can never leave that blessed store,
Who sit all day and count the silver o'er."

"Am I to blame, kind Bessie, that I may
Not ever see the sunbeams play
Upon the twinkling grass at noon;
Nor watch the crickets when the moon
Is high above the elms that sway,
Nor hear the bullfrog sing his tune?

“ There was a time, I was a boy,
It comes right up to me to-day :
It was the very first of May,
The air was dancing with its joy,
And you and I were in the pine-woods playing,
I wondered all the world was not a-Maying.
Since then I have forgot the Mayflowers’ smell,
And how to find them, I could never tell.
My hands, you say, do count the change :
So be’t. Am I ashamed of that, —
Ashamed to say that I have sat
The long hours through, nor ever run
To do a thing so very strange
As look out at the stars and sun ?
Oh, you would shame me, Bessie Grey,
If you had ever seen me lie
Upon the grass and drink the day,
And hear my little brothers cry
For bread to eat ! Not I ! Not I ! ”

“ Your father has a stalwart arm, ’tis said :
Can he not keep the children warmed and fed ? ”

“ His arm is strong ; but ’tis his soul is weak :
The courage is clean gone from out his breast.
It faded when he saw my mother die,
And all day long he did but sigh and sigh ;
His very voice is changed, when he doth speak,
And then the rent came due, — you know the rest.

“ I know not, Gilbert, I know not.”

“ Why, Bessie, ’twas the talk, I thought,
Of half the village folk you meet.”

“I go not often, Gilbert, to the street.”

“They pressed him hard, and even took
My mother’s picture from his room.
Oh, how could I their insults brook?
He settled into quiet gloom ;
And when he rallied from his mood,
He was as kind and good
Even as a little child.
But ah ! he knew no more ;
His part in life was o’er ;
He took his buttered bread and smiled.”

“And you ? And you ?”

“ I’ve done whate’er
I could, this dreary, dreary year.”

“O Gilbert ! all on you has come.”

“But then, the children laughed when I came home ;
My father takes his comfort in his way
Beside his walnut fire : they thought to fit
A paltry stove in place of it.
I heard one to the other say,
‘The chimney eats the wood.’ I said, ‘Good sir,
Take, if you dare, that fireplace away !’
And not a single brick they tried to stir.
My father lights his pipe in cheerful mood,
And picks the old nails from the bits of wood
He gathers all around to blaze his logs.
I trust ere long to pay these hungry dogs.”

‘ And you have fed and clothed the three !
No word of this has come to me.’

“ Yes, I have counted money as you know.”

“ Gilbert, forget, forget that I said so.”

“ I told you that I had forgot
How on the flowers the sunlight glanced ;
I have not seen for years the spot
Where we around the May-pole danced.
But I have not forgotten her,
The girl who let me lead her home
(The Mayflowers all around us grew ;
The dark came on before we knew),
Who put her frightened hand in mine
And walked beneath the low moonshine ;
And how the mothers were astir,
And wondered why we had not come ;
For I have watched her many a day
As she went forth upon her way :
She was too fair for me to see,
But could I turn away my eye ?
I looked whenever she went by,
And thought to make her care for me.
And she was learned, and I a fool :
I had no time to go to school ;
I scarcely on a page did look,
Save when I taught our baby-boy
To read his little spelling-book.
There was a time I thought to go,
If I the money once could earn,

By keeping close at my employ,
And from the world a little gain.
Bessie, I knew that I could learn,
For something in me told me so ;
But, ah ! the way was never plain.
I knew I loved the very things
That made that girl so sweet to see.
She spoke : I felt as if on wings :
I love the beautiful and true,
And they would blossom forth in me
If I could win her company ;
Without her I could nothing do.
She spoke, — a common ‘ Yes ’ or ‘ No,’
Or ‘ Thank you,’ said so soft and low ;
And what a wondrous charm did fall
Upon the air that felt the sound !
And every thing was great around ;
But I was small, but I was small !
Yet I was not a boor at heart,
Somehow the time would never come
When I could break me from my home,
And from my feeble parents part.

“Of late, our little fortunes mend ;
A friend has opened now the way —
With his good name, which he doth lend —
To brighter hopes ; thank God, I may
Now lay by for a rainy day.
But what of that ? It gives me right
To seek a partner for my life ;
To leave my little store to-night,
And ask a woman for my wife.
Yet I am what I was before,

The same poor Gilbert, and no more :
The money does not make me wise,
Nor great nor noble in her eyes."

"No, Gilbert ; not the money, true ;
For something else is teaching you."

"What, Bessie, are you crying ? What ?
Sobbing you are ? 'Tis kind of you.
I thank you, thank you ; I will go.
I cannot have your pity so.
I am not proud : it is not that ;
I'm glad to have your kindness too ;
But I am sad enough. God knows
I would not vex your sweet repose."

"Stay ! stay ! Who was the maiden, she
You named awhile ago to me ?"

"You know her, Bessie Grey you know."

"O Gilbert ! say you will forgive, — forgive :
I am not worthy by your side to live.
Gilbert, O Gilbert ! scorn me now and go :
You are a hero, I a girl of dreams, —
A girl of dew and tears and thin moonbeams.
You have been fighting, manfully and brave,
And I have whiled the hours that Heaven gave,
Rocked by the whirring mill and running streams."

"Bessie, you were as far above to see
As yonder swallow up to heaven bent ;
So beautiful and pure you were to me."



"STAY! STAY! WHO WAS THE MAIDEN, SHE
YOU NAMED AWHILE AGO TO ME?"



“ Gilbert, you were so near to men, I ween
They loved you every single step you went.
O Gilbert, you were noble : I was mean.”

“ See, now, the swallow flies unto the eaves,
And love-words to her little children leaves,
And food to every open mouth she gives.
Who is it combs her Robin’s tangled hair,
And smooths his collar with a patient care,
And dusts the miller’s apron every morn,
And lifts the buckets full of maple sap,
And brings the golden butter at the dawn,
And calls the hungry chickens to her lap ?
Who knows them all, each brownish spot and speck,
And lets them from her gentle fingers peck,
And perch upon her beautiful white neck ?”

“ How know you, sir, what hour I feed my brood?
You have been spying on us through the wood.”

“ *You* should not scold me, Bessie Grey, for it :
Just now you blamed me that I did not quit,
For grass and trees and dew, the dusky store ;
I came this morn, but never once before.
If you are dreaming, when you live each day
A life so pure and good, for others’ sake,
I’m thinking it is quite as good a way
To dream, then, Bessie, as to be awake.”

“ But, Gilbert, you ”—

“ No more of me, I pray :
I would not hear your praises, had not I
A wish you saw me in a partial way, —

A wish to gain the prize for which I try,—
The prize so far above me, far above —
A wish — come, tell me if you love me, say?"

" If you will tell me what it is to love."

" I'll go: perchance to-morrow you'll find out."

" No, stay! I thought I hated you to-day;
And can it be that I have turned about?"

" You love me now, you love me now, you say?"

" It looks like that;—come, do not kiss me so."

" To-morrow morning will you hate again?"

" Come, then, and I will tell you if I know,
Before my father swings adown the lane
To milk the cows; when Robin's curly head
Is moist and shining, as he sleeps in bed,
While all is silent in the wood and glen,
And on the grass are little beads of dew,
Come, Gilbert, come, and I will tell you true
If I do love you, or do hate you then!"

OUR STEP-MOTHER





OUR STEP-MOTHER.

SHE sat all alone in our poor little room,
And there she would sew as near by we were sleeping.
Her lamp flickered dimly to lighten the gloom,
And sometimes I listened, and thought she was weeping.

The garments were slender and faded and worn,
Yet patient she drew in her needle and thread ;
The mouse crept around in the ceiling forlorn,
And the fire lapped the chimney and asked to be fed.

One evening, her stocking again and again
She dropt in her lap, and she read from her book,
A hymn of the earth waiting long for the rain,
So the children of God, for the dew of His look.

I lay there in silence, awake in my bed,
And drew in my breath, and my little heart throbbed.
"How long, oh my Father in Heaven ?" she said,
And bent down her face on the casement and sobbed.

I ran from my bed, with the cold all a-tremble,
 And clung to her bosom : "O, mother, you weep !"
 She lifted her wet eyes, she could not dissemble,
 And said only, "Angel, are you not asleep ?"



AND BENT DOWN HER FACE ON THE CASEMENT AND SOBED.

"O, mother, you'll tell me — I know you will do it !
 What makes you so heavy when night cometh on ?"
 "My child, you are young, and you cannot see through it —
 The care of the poor, when the money is gone."

"No, no ! now, my mother, you're hiding from me,
 For something you have that is sore at your heart ;
 You never can hide it from your Rosalie,
 I'll not go to bed till you tell me a part."

Then spake she out clearly : "You are not my child !
 Your father was cold, and he cared not for me ;

His eyes on your mother, 'tis said, never smiled,
But he offered a home, and a wife I must be."

I fell to the floor with a sharp bitter cry.

"Are you not my mother? Take back what you've spoken!"
She broke into weeping aloud: "What am I,
"O God? For an innocent heart I have broken."

Then gently she raised me, her tears dropping slow.

"I've striven to present you both spotless above,
God knows I have loved you, my angels, as though
You were my own children, and he were my love!"



"BUT HE OFFERED A HOME, AND A WIFE I MUST BE."

"And he were my love." What, what could it be?
The heart of my childhood could fathom it not,
But once, when the woman was dawning in me,
It flashed on my soul like a vivid green spot.

She loved not my father when they two were wed,
Another she held in her bosom's retreat !
Who was he, belovèd and faithless, or dead ?
I dreamed of him nightly, how they two should meet.

· · · · ·
And now let me calmly my story begin :
One Christmas, when making our presents, she sat ;
I opened the door and a stranger came in ;
He paused on the sill — what a vision was that !

His figure was noble, and gentle his mien,
With eye like a woman, so kindling and deep,
A painter, a poet, the man of my dream !
When he looked at my mother I thought I should weep.

She rose up — she fainted and fell at his feet,
Her face was as white as the linen she dropped ;
He raised her up gently, and reaching a seat,
He knelt down to see if her breathing had stopped.

She started and gazed on him: "Why comest thou ?"
He spoke not a word, but her apron he kissed ;
The blood crept along to her temples and brow,
I heard not, but she understood him, I wist.

O, picture transcendent ! A woman to love,
As pure as the lily that thirsts for the dew,
Long drooping and faint for the freshness above,
Now opening its petals to breathe it anew !

A woman of fragrance and modesty, sweet
As the violet that blossoms so pale in the cold,
But springs up in wonder the sunlight to greet,
And the blue of its beautiful eyes to unfold !

A man with the look of heroical fate,
 On the lines of a weary and delicate face ;
 A mind that had pondered and wrought out the great,
 A spirit of rarest and tenderest grace !



ONE CHRISTMAS, WHEN MAKING OUR PRESENTS, SHE SAT.

“ Didst thou not forget me ? ” the stranger then said.
 “ Forget thee ? they told me we never should meet.
 And so in my bitterest grief I was wed —
 But here are his children, a drop that was sweet.”

He loosened his arm as he sat by her side,
 So close he had watched her, he dreamed of none other,
 And turned and beheld us with wonder and pride ;
 “ Come hither, my daughters, and comfort your mother.”

O comfort, that little word comfort he spoke,
 With a gleam in his eye, for she needed not that ;
 She laughed in her joy, but within me awoke
 A pang, as together so happy they sat.



BUT WITHIN ME AWOKE A PANG, AS TOGETHER
 SO HAPPY THEY SAT.

No longer she needed my tears in the night,
 No longer, in patience, her secret we kept,
 But, oh when they held us so loving and tight,
 In sweetest amazement, I smiled and I wept.

A covert, a shelter from dangers and fears,
 The arms of a father and mother we had ;
 No longer a child with the burden of years,
 I laid down my sorrows and learned to be glad.





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